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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 DJIBOUTI 000199

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SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI: S/CT AMBASSADOR BENJAMIN AND GODJ NATIONAL
SECURITY ADVISOR DISCUSS ERITREA, YEMEN, AND SOMALIA

REF: 10 DJIBOUTI 13

CLASSIFIED BY: Eric Wong, DCM, U.S. Department of State, U.S.
Embassy, Djibouti; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Djibouti's key security concerns include Eritrean sponsorship of al-Shabaab fighters as well as ethnic-Afar rebels, al-Qa'ida forces allying with al-Houthi rebels in neighboring Yemen, and maintaining the loyalty of Somali TFG forces combating Islamic extremists, according to Djiboutian National Security Advisor Hassan Said Khaireh. The presence of over 5,000 foreign troops (nearly half of whom are U.S. forces at Camp Lemonnier) raises concern among Djiboutian security officials that terrorists may attempt to target Djibouti. Key areas where Djibouti seeks USG assistance to bolster its counterterrorism capabilities include: border protection (e.g., equipment to screen travelers from neighboring Somalia and Ethiopia), training of personnel; establishment of a laboratory for analysis; and material support for counterterrorism forces (e.g., vehicles, arms, and equipment).
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On January 28, S/CT Coordinator for Counterterrorism Ambassador Daniel Benjamin met with Hassan Said Khaireh, who is triple-hatted as Djibouti's National Security Advisor, Director of Djibouti's National Security Service (DNSS), and head of President Ismail Omar Guelleh's Office of Military Affairs. Ambassador Swan, S/CT Mark Thompson, and DCM (note-taker) accompanied Ambassador Benjamin. Hassan Said was accompanied by Abdillahi Mohamed Abdillahi, deputy director of the DNSS.

¶3. (S/NF) Also accompanying Ambassador Benjamin's party were GRPO chief; COL Rich Clarke, Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) J-3; and MAJ Craig Miller, JSOC Liaison to S/CT.

DJIBOUTI FEARS THREAT TO ALLIED MILITARY FORCES

14. (S/NF) Hassan Said expressed appreciation for the USG's close collaboration with the Government of Djibouti (GODJ). He welcomed Amb. Benjamin's visit, noting that President Guelleh had directed him to "sensitize" the USG delegation to the threats Djibouti faced. Djibouti's counterterrorism efforts had begun, Hassan Said noted, in 1991. Since 2001, Djibouti had welcomed working with the United States, France, other European countries, and Asia. There were now more than 5,000 foreign troops in Djibouti representing a possible target for terrorists, including extremists from neighboring Yemen and Somalia. To counter such threats, the GODJ not only partnered with U.S. and European allies, but also exchanged threat information with other authorities in the region (including Somalia, Somaliland, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Yemen). Liaison with security services of neighboring countries had led to success in detaining suspects, as well as to deterring or stopping potential threats. As the GODJ was responsible for protecting expatriate members of the diplomatic and international community in Djibouti, it needed to work with foreign intelligence services and foreign militaries to guarantee security.

15. (C) Since 2009, piracy off the coast of Somalia had also become an issue for concern, Hassan Said added, further exacerbating fears that Djibouti was a target for terrorists and other hostile elements. (NOTE: Djibouti plays a prominent role in supporting international counterpiracy efforts, not only as a venue for key conferences organized by the International Maritime Organization,

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but also by hosting the European Union's "Atalanta" counterpiracy naval task force, and by hosting the historic deployment of Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces destroyers and P-3 maritime surveillance aircraft since May 2009. END NOTE.)

16. (C) To address "all the facets of terrorism in the region," the GODJ had created a rapid intervention force. However, Djibouti's limited resources meant it could not fight terrorism alone; Djibouti therefore called on the United States as a key partner to provide assistance. Djibouti also sought assistance from other countries, including "friendly" Arab states, Hassan Said noted.

AREAS FOR USG COUNTERTERRORISM ASSISTANCE

17. (C) Hassan Said identified the following areas as priorities for possible donor assistance from the USG:

- border protection: specifically equipment to screen the large number of trucks and other vehicles traveling from neighboring Somalia and Ethiopia;
- training of personnel: for those responsible for monitoring cross-border movements; the GODJ also seeks training in explosives detection;
- establishment of a laboratory, to support scientific analysis;
- vehicles, arms, and equipment: to provide the GODJ with the "means of intervention" (vehicles were needed to transport GODJ security service components responsible for anti-terrorism functions, including the National Gendarmerie's Intervention Group (GIGN) and the newly established coast guard);
- other unidentified "preventive measures" that could be employed by GODJ security forces.

¶8. (C) Hassan Said highlighted his concern that the USG had sometimes been "tardy" in its response to previous host country requests. In response, Amb. Benjamin concurred that the USG's budgeting and planning processes were lengthy.

TOP CONCERNS: AL-SHABAAB, YEMEN, ERITREA

¶9. (C) Djibouti's greatest security concern, according to Hassan Said, was al-Shabaab and other Islamic groups -- including Hisbul Islam and even Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a (ASWJ) -- who could exert undue influence on Djibouti's (moderate Islamic) population. A priority for the GODJ was therefore identifying those who sought to radicalize the population by establishing madrassas or similar institutions. Such radicalization was already evident in Somalia, where Somalis who had travelled to Yemen and Pakistan for 4-6 months of "religious instruction" had received ideological indoctrination.

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¶10. (S) As for Saudi influence on mosques, Hassan Said observed that in mid-2007 the GODJ had expelled a Saudi diplomat (al-Kouflehli, NFI) who had headed the Saudi Islamic Institute in Djibouti. While declared persona non grata by the GODJ, the former Saudi diplomat now ran relief operations in Ethiopia's Ogaden region; a dual Sudanese-Djiboutian national who headed a Saudi NGO remained in contact with him, Hassan Said added.

¶11. (C) Yemen was also a key concern for Djibouti, due to the presence of al-Qa'ida, as well as the threat of southern secession. Al-Houthi rebels had forged an alliance with al-Qa'ida forces, Hassan Said asserted, as demonstrated by the large number of al-Qa'ida representatives found in regions controlled by al-Houthi (e.g., Sa'dah). Houthi businessmen reportedly financed tuition-free universities that fostered extremists, and al-Qa'ida financed non-Yemeni students (including French nationals and other Europeans) to study at universities in Yemen.

ERITREA TRAINING AL-SHABAAB AND AFAR REBELS

¶12. (S) Eritrea represented another threat to Djibouti's security, Hassan Said observed, particularly as it continued to construct military fortifications on Djiboutian territory (at Ras Doumeira) occupied since at least June 2008. Despite international condemnation from the United Nations Security Council, the European Union, IGAD, the African Union, and others, Eritrean troops still had not withdrawn (as Djiboutian troops had) to establish a neutral "no-man's land". Hassan Said asserted that there were links between al-Shabaab and Eritrea: Djiboutian diplomats in Cairo had reported encountering Somali youth who had been trained in Eritrea, by the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE), for operations in Djibouti, and who were members of al-Shabaab. Such Somalis trained in Eritrean camps needed to be returned to Somalia, Hassan Said added.

¶13. (C) Eritrea was attempting to reestablish an Afar-dominated liberation front to destabilize Djibouti, and was also training ethnic-Afar rebels in Eritrea, Hassan Said stated. Noting the 1994 and 2000 peace agreements that had ended the civil war between the ethnic-Somali dominated Djiboutian administration and the ethnic-Afar rebel group, the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD), Hassan Said observed that Eritrea was training militant Afars from Ethiopia and Eritrea--as there was insufficient support for the rebel cause among Afars in Djibouti.

¶14. (C) Questioned about his outlook for neighboring Somalia, Hassan Said responded that one key mechanism for addressing counterterrorism in Somalia was simply securing adequate financial resources. Specifically, funds were needed to pay wages to the Transitional Federal Government's (TFG) troops. Despite its own extremely limited resources, Djibouti had provided assistance to the TFG, including training several hundred TFG troops to serve as a "vanguard" for a revitalized national army of Somalia. He noted that Sudan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia were among those countries now providing material support to the TFG. As a result, the TFG was now preparing an operation to "decimate the Islamicists," he

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declared.

¶15. (C) COMMENT. Despite Djibouti's status as the most stable country in the Horn of Africa, Djiboutian security officials remain vigilant in the face of suspected Eritrean-sponsored rebel activity, al-Shabaab threats from neighboring Somalia, and the presence of al-Qa'ida forces in neighboring Yemen. A small country with limited resources, Djibouti has nevertheless placed itself at the forefront of international efforts to promote regional security. Djibouti's diplomatic and military support for Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (ranging from hosting UN-sponsored "Djibouti Process" peace talks, to training TFG troops, and publicly committing to deploy a battalion to support AMISOM); its hosting of international counterpiracy contingents (e.g., from the EU and Japan); and its hosting of U.S. and French bases, including Camp Lemonnier, the only U.S. military base in Africa - underscore President Guelleh's active support for strategic goals that advance U.S. interests. These activities, however, have also raised the profile of Djibouti, and the concern that terrorist elements may find Djibouti an irresistible target, if its counterterrorism capabilities are not strengthened. END COMMENT.

¶16. (U) This cable was cleared by S/CT.
SWAN